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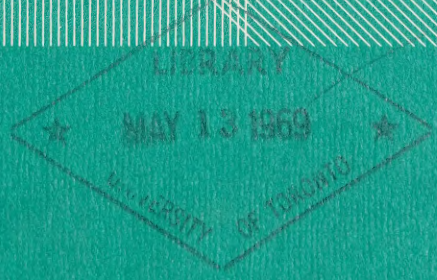
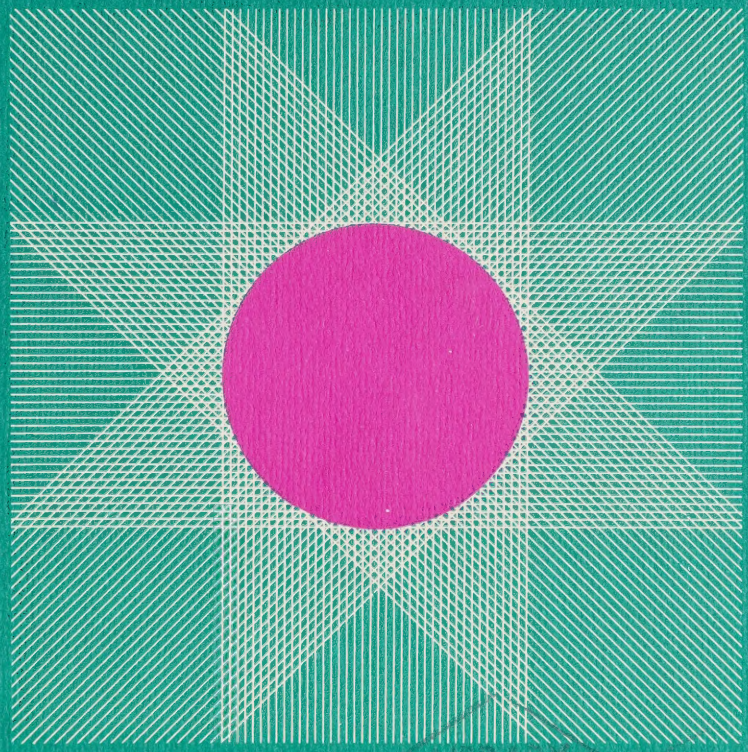
# SCREEN STUDY

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A report on the National Film Board of Canada  
and McGill University Summer Research Institute of  
Screen Study

Canadian National film board  
General publication

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## Behind the Mask

To many of us it may seem that dreams make reality possible. But today innovations in technological reality have accelerated to a stage where man's wildest dreams have been surpassed.

In consequence, the edges between familiar reality and illusion are blurred. More established means of containing, ordering and expressing human experience do not cope adequately with today's speed-of-light environment. Much of our experience of both dream and reality is transformed by moving images and computer patterns.

Because these new media of expression are still in the hands of specialists, their operating structures are unknown to most of us. Their syntax or rhetoric is a mystery. Under these circumstances each of us is more or less compelled to lease our nervous systems to media scribes. Lacking adequate understanding we assent to their formulas of human living and adopt their choices. While the exploration of information systems is a legiti-

mate preoccupation of scientists, the exploration of human sensibilities, traditionally in the domain of the humanities, is being extended to newer media only grudgingly.

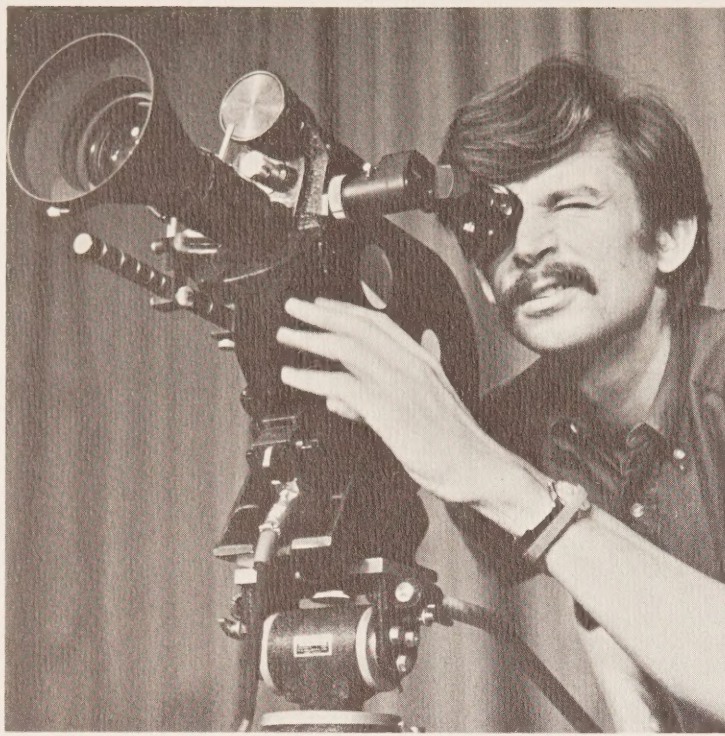
This is why the National Film Board of Canada and McGill University joined forces to set up a six-week Summer Research Institute. Both felt the need to explore in some depth the social and personal consequences of media. Participants in these sessions, drawn from across Canada, soon discovered that our expressions shift, our values and attitudes change, our institutions wax and wane in accordance with myths and legends, old and new, that float through a scanning tube or hang suspended before us on a screen. In a very real sense, electric images shape our lives.

What follows recaptures the NFB-McGill Institute's efforts to probe behind contemporary masks of technology and to rediscover there, if possible, the human being.

Mark Slade







Universities are awakening to a need to include film study in the curriculum. Most of these courses consider film as an art form that can be appropriately studied by more or less traditional academic methods. Some, McGill's most notably, have adopted an environmental studies approach that considers film and mass media generally as posing problems in changing perceptions of our society.

Whether films are good or bad, whether we like them or not, we should use them as tools enabling us to understand more and more of the visual environment that surrounds us.





The nervous system and perceptual habits can be seen as additional parameters operating in any organization grid; like film emulsion or pigment, they tend to be constants.

Like them, too, they can only be manipulated within narrow limits. They are sleeping partners in the creative process; they shape the experience, determine the kind of experience possible, but do not create it. Creation of structure is the ability to control variables, choosing some rather than others, selecting boundaries and organizing 'meanings'. Stated somewhat differently, creative expression is the control exercised at the intersection of a total sensory environment with other environments.





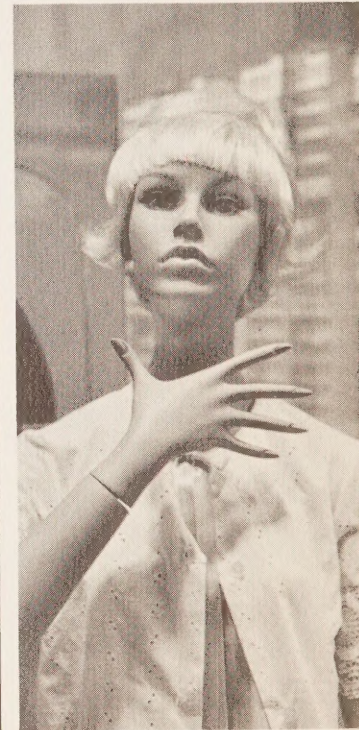
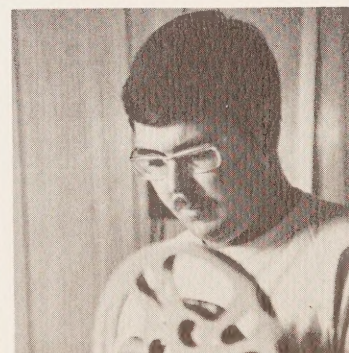
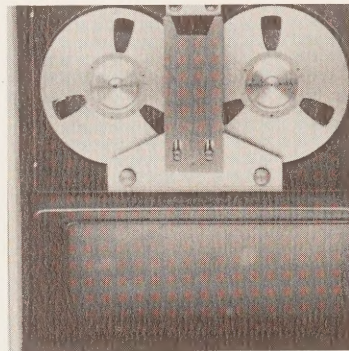
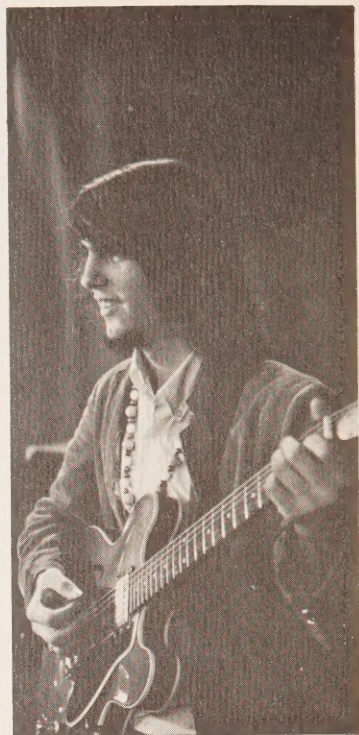
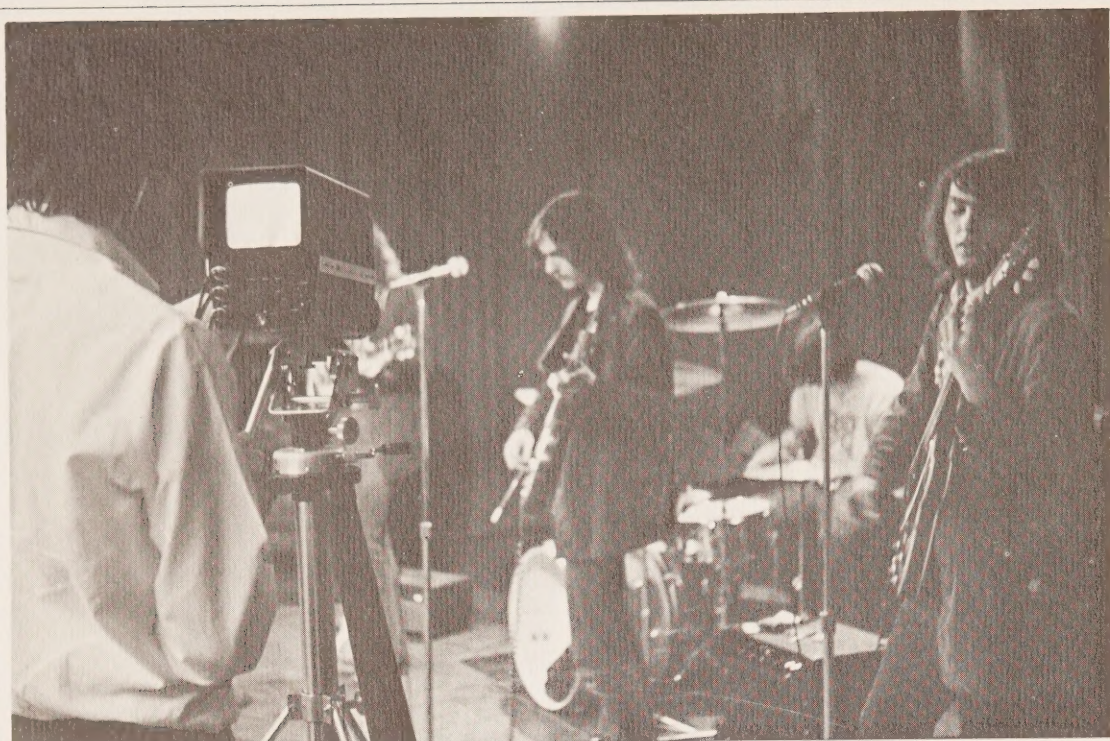


We were talking about the space between us all and the people who hide themselves behind a wall of illusion. Never glimpse the truth - then it's far too late - when they pass away.

George Harrison









When knowledge of ordinary affairs is translated in large measure from the things and objects and data of blind print to be transmitted directly by electromagnetic radiation, these things and objects and data become events. Television is an event. A film is an event. A guitar wired to an amplifier has no beginning, middle or end: it creates an embracing noise that sets up a percussive dialogue with the marrow of our bones as well as skin and eustachian tubes.

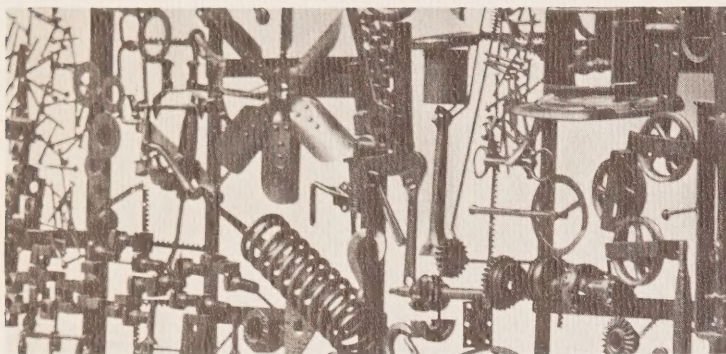
So not only is time a function of space, the message a function of media but, according to this theory, ends and aims are an inseparable function of means. Here is another intersection rich with potential for communication study.

The comic book and its twentieth-century twin, the television screen, have wired us all directly into the central brain of the country. Either we can succumb to their mystiques or we can, through learning the languages of these communication media, free ourselves of their domination over our minds and avoid the more frightening effects of the electronic age.

Because film and television introduce a special kind of language or mode of communication, with unique properties, these media become a distinctive and occasionally eloquent means of expression. Along with other non-verbal structuring devices like computers they are the ingredients of multi-media forms in which artists or others, for good or ill, are currently attempting a total sensory involvement of individuals on a massive scale.

The task of screen education, or media education, in achieving cultural literacy, is to enable students to uncover the operating principles of screen language - social, esthetic, psychological, historical, anthropological, or what you will - leaping over traditional subject barriers. This takes film from the idea of art, or film as an adjunct to literature, or as an audio-visual recording device, to the realms of awareness.





In recent developments, not least of which is the widespread electrification of human expression, the grid imposed by film on otherwise random experience has become increasingly open. Chance elements are characteristic of field structure. A more linear model, which print encouraged, tended to create neatly closed systems. Linear models drew their structure from mechanical analogues. The organic nature of electromagnetic energy shifts the emphasis from mechanical to more organic structuring.

One important effect of this development is to require all of us to become participants in creative expression rather than spectators of the finished work of specialists.

Instead of matching our experience to a work of imagination, we have experience by interaction with a work of imagination. The 'open' grid produces clues but requires completion. In this sense we all become artists.

The NFB-McGill Summer Research Institute of Film and Media Study was organized by Peter Ohlin, Mark Slade and Terry Ryan.







